

## Love in a Time of Hate Speech<sup>1</sup>

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

*Our reading today was from Christian Scripture: Paul's first letter to the Corinthians Chapter 13:1-13*

### *Sermon*

Hate speech is defined as speech that insults or threatens groups, based on race, color, religion, or other traits such as national origin, sexual orientation, gender, or disability. While many nations have laws banning hate speech, in the United States, freedom of speech has always won out over such international bans. We take pride in defending the rights of people to say even those things we find most abhorrent.

But what does it mean to brand whole groups of people as evil, as those who should be excluded or erased or wiped out? This tendency is really nothing new in American life, but it seems to be rearing its ugly head in more blatant and explosive ways among our politicians during this campaign season. What might be the effects of such hate speech, both for those who are the targets of such hate, and for those who are doing the hating?

Churches find themselves in a complex situation during this season. As tax exempt organizations, churches may not endorse or oppose particular candidates or political parties. But as moral leaders in our society, we also must speak out about the moral issues of our time, even when that involves what is happening in the political sphere. So to walk this line, I won't be naming any names today. But since I won't name names, I will engage in one small act of name-calling. I will refer to politicians who engage in hate speech as bullies. Because all of this makes me wonder—what is the appeal of bullies in politics?

According to an article by Thomas Edsell in the New York Times,<sup>2</sup> our current bullies in politics especially appeal to the fear and anger of working class white men, who are their primary supporters. He talks about how these ordinary folks have lost confidence in the system—they are less able to earn a good living, less able to support their families, and feel threats from both within our country and outside it. He quotes psychotherapist Joseph Burgo: “For many people, [a bully’s] braggadocio, contempt, and grandiosity come across as self-confident strength. When frightened by dangers from abroad or here at home, many people gravitate to the ‘strong man’ who promises to vanquish their fears and confusion.”

A bully politician's hate speech gives people someone to blame who has less power than they do—yet who can be perceived as threatening the little they do have. Out of a sense of fear and insecurity, grows a huge temptation to draw boundaries between us and them, as if that will increase our safety. So those who are perceived as different from us are demonized. Spurious claims are made, such as “immigrants will take our jobs,” or “Muslims are trying to destroy our society,” or “black drug-dealers are causing drug addiction in Maine.” No wonder that the issue of welcoming Syrian refugees has become such a hot-button for reactivity—many are both Muslim and immigrants.

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2 [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/02/opinion/campaign-stops/donald-trumps-appeal.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/02/opinion/campaign-stops/donald-trumps-appeal.html?_r=0)

This demonization grows out of a world view in which people are seen as primarily prone to evil. Linguist George Lakoff spells it out more explicitly in terms of our understandings of family.<sup>3</sup> We all have family values, he says, but we imagine family in very divergent ways. He has labeled these two different outlooks as “strict-father family values,” versus “nurturant-parent family values.”

In the strict-father model of the family, the world is seen as primarily dangerous, competitive and beset with evils. Children are born in evil, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good. What is needed is a strict father who can financially support the family in a difficult world, protect them from its dangers, and teach his children right from wrong.

In this outlook, right and wrong are absolutes to be obeyed, and the strict father must punish disobedience with painful corporal punishment. External discipline will thus be internalized, which is necessary for success in a competitive world. A good person is someone who is disciplined enough to be obedient, to learn what is right, to do what is right, and to pursue his self interest to prosper and become self-reliant. A bad person is one who does not learn obedience, or do what is right, and therefore is not disciplined enough to become prosperous, and so becomes dependent. According to this view, do-gooders actually mess up the system because they encourage such lack of discipline and self-reliance.

On the other hand, the nurturant parent model of the family assumes that the world, despite its dangers and difficulties, is basically good, and can be made better. It is one’s responsibility to work toward that. Children are born good, and can be helped to become better. Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. What is needed are parents who nurture their children and raise their children to be nurturers of others.

Nurturing includes empathy and responsibility, that is, feeling and caring how others feel and taking care of oneself and others for whom we are responsible. Nurturing includes protecting the vulnerable from harm, fostering fulfillment in life, building trust and open two-way communication. It emphasizes fairness and freedom. To grow in goodness is to become more empathic and giving, someone who cares for those who are in trouble or in need, and who builds up the community. A bad person, though no one is seen as irretrievably bad, would be one who is selfish, dominating, and unconcerned about the needs of others. A good society will always care for the least among them, because nurturing is how people grow.

These differing world views can help us to better understand what can sometimes seem incomprehensible to religious liberals like UUs. Our religious history began with a rebellion against the perspective that saw the world as primarily dangerous and beset with evils. We might say that UUs are the embodiment of the nurturant-parent model, and the idea that the world is basically good. Retired UU minister Tom Schade writes a blog on UUs and public life. He says: “The signature gesture of conservatism is to demonize. The mission of religious liberalism is to re-humanize this culture.”<sup>4</sup>

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3 George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, (University of Chicago Press: 1996)

4 <http://www.tomschade.com>

And so we preach and seek to live that affirmation we say almost every week: “Love is the doctrine of this church.” But our firm belief in the basic goodness of the world can mean that we have more difficulty trying to make sense of the problem of human evil. Liberal theology and philosophy lost much of their momentum after the Second World War, when the deeds of Hitler and the Nazis revealed new depths of evil within humankind. When things are going badly, there is more grounding for a pessimistic view of human nature.

Another way of framing the differences between right-wing and left-wing might be based on how we approach the problem of evil and the location of goodness. For those with a conservative world view, there is an appeal for a strong man who seems to have the confidence and authority to tackle the evil-doers, and protect us from the world's dangers.

But what do UU's have to offer in the face of evil and trouble? First off, I believe we offer a different perspective on where to look for answers. Unitarian Universalists don't turn to those in traditional authority for answers. Our mistrust of such authority is a central part of the values we hold dear. This is because we see hierarchy as part of the problem of evil, not part of the solution.

To unravel this issue we need to look at power, and the ways it is perceived by different groups in America. Schade puts it like this:

The [supporter of a bully politician] is drawn to the unaccountable hero; the fantasy of being the winner, the man freed of petty restrictions of 'political correctness' in his speech and actions, unfettered economically, entitled to what is rightfully his, and able to do what he pleases. It is literally a sadistic fantasy -- the thrill of unlimited power to be exercised despite the objections of those on whom it is unleashed.

The pagan activist, Starhawk, calls such power, “power-over.” But there is another way to interpret power. Religious liberals are drawn to power that is shared, what Starhawk calls “power-with,” a power of collaboration for the benefit of all. This kind of power leans toward egalitarianism and compassion. It says that those in power-over will always amass more such power to themselves, and not act in the best interests of all the people. So we must join together in democratic interconnections to hold accountable those who are most likely to abuse the power they wield.

When we say, “we believe in love,” it is one form of expressing a commitment to compassionate and collaborative power. But what practical steps can we take to activating this love power? One step is to do the mental work of reimagining our world as if we are all interconnected. We say this in our principles too: “We affirm the interconnected web of all existence, of which we are a part.” Sometimes we think of it in family terms—that we are all brothers and sisters, siblings in one family. If one person is suffering, can we turn away? Not if we see that person as inextricably linked to our own being.

Another important way we activate the power of Love is to do the work of justice in our society. Cornel West has said: “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” In the face of anti-immigrant hate speech, we can stand up for the well-being of immigrants and welcome them into our community. In the face of anti-Muslim hate speech, we can befriend our Muslim neighbors, and get to know them, and speak up in their defense. We can let those who are being persecuted know that we will not leave them to stand alone.

I remember a poem by German pastor Martin Niemoller, which has often been recited, in looking at the slow response of the churches during the time of the Nazis.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Another German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also wrestled with how to respond to the evils of Nazism. He joined the resistance to Hitler, and ultimately was killed in a German concentration camp. He wrote: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” And also, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” So an important part of the work of love in a time of hate speech, is to speak out and to act on behalf of justice.

When I was first pondering the topic of this sermon, I did not imagine that I would find myself thinking about the singer Beyonce and the super-bowl of last Sunday. But in the last week there has been a virtual firestorm of argument related to Beyonce that has to do with love in a time of hate speech. Did any of you see the half-time show, or Beyonce's new music video released the day before?

I did not watch the super-bowl but I did see the music video—entitled *Formation*, and later watched some recordings of the half-time show.

Many writers have been over the moon with delight about the video, describing it as an amazing celebration of blackness, and black womanhood. But others are protesting, calling it hate speech against police officers.<sup>5</sup> I want to point out that there is nothing in the lyrics or images of the video advocating hate or violence against police officers. There is one heart-breaking image of a young black boy in a hoody dancing in front of a line of white police officers. At the end of his dance, the officers all put their hands up, as if surrendering. There is a shot of graffiti saying “Stop shooting us.”

These images are clearly referencing the #blacklivesmatter movement that has been working to end police or vigilante violence against black people. The video was released on the birthday of Trayvon Martin, and one day before the birthday of Sandra Bland. But mostly, the video is filled with images of black people dancing, or being beautiful. *Formation* preaches black self-love of a very deep kind—celebrating black Afro hair, and Jackson Five nostrils, and black southern heritage.

One blogger, using the name Awesomely Luvvie<sup>6</sup>, reflects on the reaction to the video, and a reaction to one of her own posts. I found her words so helpful, I want to do a long quote. She writes:

The idea that somehow upholding and affirming my own Blackness, being proud about it, being loud about it, is some type of anti-white statement will never stop blowing my mind. **It’s the “All Lives Matter” Syndrome. When we say BLACK LIVES MATTER, it doesn’t mean other lives don’t. If I say I love being Black it don’t**

5 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/09/entertainment/beyonce-boycott-super-bowl-feat/> and [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/beyonces-super-bowl-show-bringing-both-praise-and-criticism/2016/02/08/e7006d6c-ccc4-11e5-90d3-34c2e42653ac\\_story.html?tid=pm\\_national\\_pop\\_b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/beyonces-super-bowl-show-bringing-both-praise-and-criticism/2016/02/08/e7006d6c-ccc4-11e5-90d3-34c2e42653ac_story.html?tid=pm_national_pop_b)

6 <http://www.awesomelylurvee.com/2016/02/about-writing-blackness-race-white-hurt.html>

**mean I hate White...** The idea that my posts have been “us vs. them” because they’ve been ‘super Black’ is bull...

She goes on to explain:

**You know why we have to constantly affirm Blackness? It’s because the world is telling us that Blackness is a liability.** We have to constantly stand up and say we are proud to be Black because we are constantly told that we are somehow less than because we’re Black. People will then argue and say things like, “well why can’t I say White Pride?” Let me tell you why. **Because White Pride has killed Black people. “White pride” is what people yelled when they lynched folks and hung them in trees. As people said “white pride” in their white hoods, they dragged Black bodies behind their cars. Never has Black Pride dragged a white child or burned a white church or shot a white boy without consequence.** White Pride is not the same as Black Pride because white pride has denigrated us for centuries and has been used as a tool to actively harm us.

As someone who is white, what I am to do in the face of Black self-love and Black Pride? What about just being quiet and listening this time? Another theme that has made the rounds on social media is something called “White fragility.” This is the idea that if a white person's feelings are hurt, then that matters more than the injustice of centuries of racism. Let's think about it. How is it hate speech to celebrate the beauty of a race of people who have been humiliated, cast down, and killed for centuries because of their race? How is it hate speech to call attention to those centuries of history in order to promote better understanding?

One white person responded to the blog by asking why Awesomely Luvvie wasn't promoting love. Here is her compassionate answer:

...Essentially when we talk about “promoting love” when it comes to race a lot of times it’s from cowardly people who don’t want to talk about the uncomfortable stuff. It’s from people who do not want to actually say, “this is a difficult conversation to have.” It’s from people who think love means harmony all the time even when you’ve harmed somebody. The person you’ve harmed is not obligated to make you feel better or to say “I forgive you.”

...So you don’t get to come to my inbox and tell me I haven’t been promoting love okay. I always operate from a place of love. ... **I promote love in that I promote understanding. Let’s have these conversations about race. Let’s have these conversations about privilege so we can all move forward as opposed to sweeping things under the rug.**

I have an ...amazing audience: Black, white, all different colors, straight, gay, trans, male, female, gender binary. I welcome everybody. ...**Love is understanding and some of ya’ll need to understand the state of affairs and some of ya’ll need to understand that Black people loving ourselves is a revolutionary act and you need to let us have it.**

I encourage you to watch Beyonce's video *Formation*. You can find it on the Internet. There's a “clean” version for those who want to avoid certain kinds of more colorful language. Read the commentary. I didn't understand most of it until I had wiser folks explain it to me. But it was well worth it.

One form of love in a time of hate speech is the ability to love yourself, even when the whole system is conspiring to make you hate yourself. This might be about race, as in the music video *Formation*, or it might be about gender, or national origin, or sexual orientation, or religion. Each one of us is a beautiful gift of creation, and we should celebrate when anyone who has been vilified can find it in their souls to rejoice in their own identity and being.

Another form of love in a time of hate speech is the ability to listen to those who have been excluded from justice, without having to make excuses for yourself, or criticisms of the other, or asking them to tone it down. It is being willing to have the difficult conversations, and not worrying about getting our feelings hurt because someone is angry about a twelve year old child shot by police, or a whole town in Michigan having its water poisoned.

Living out the power of Love is not the same as being nice. Love asks more of us than that. It asks us to listen deeply even when the conversations makes us uncomfortable. Love asks us to speak out boldly on behalf of those who are being hurt, or hated, and to take action for justice. Love asks us to keep within our imagination the vision for which we labor: the vision and reality of the interconnected web. We are all part of one another.

### *Closing Words*

In words from a poem by May Sarton.<sup>7</sup>

Return to the most human,  
nothing less will nourish the torn spirit,  
the bewildered heart,  
the angry mind:  
and from the ultimate duress,  
pierced with the breath of anguish,  
speak of love.

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<sup>7</sup> “Unison Benediction” from *Collected Poems 1930-1993*